

Alexis Pavone - 1913815 - Foundation Assignment - Element 2 - Essay

Abstract

This essay explores my reference tracks in 5 key areas.

1. The defining characteristics of the musical genres.
2. How the reference tracks conform to the musical genre.
3. The production techniques used in the reference tracks and musical genres.
4. How these techniques have been applied in my tracks.
5. Additional musical decisions I have made in the creation of my tracks.

Track 1: Not The Same

Reference Track: Courage – Celine Dion

Genre: Pop

1.

Wildridge (2019) claims that pop music is typically characterised by its commercial success; Errey (2020) argues similarly that it's the genre that 'produces the most hits' (EnglishCLUB), and Richards (2016) says 'POP is generally regarded as a commercial genre which has mass audience appeal' (p.164). While all are vaguely true, Berryman, Doan and Guinane (2016) say pop music 'has become an umbrella term for a huge range of musical styles. The term 'pop music' is simply short for 'popular music'... a lot of very different styles of music have been popular at different times' (p.138). There are different features that define each genre according to the style, decade and country in which they appeared, and changes that were largely driven by culture, politics and technology.

This remains true today. Pop is an eclectic pallet of influences, emotions and interpretations delivered in formulaic packages hidden in production processes and album sequence. Based on Kopcow's pop album template (2014), track number 5 is the ballad, confirming that the reference track is a pop song.

2.

This recent release appears on Spotify search under pop. Produced and co-written by composer Stephan Moccio (*Earned it* - The Weekend, *Wrecking Ball* - Miley Cyrus, *I know you* - Skylar Grey) it contains more stylistic and technical variety than the artist's previous work, demonstrating she is keeping up with pop-production trends and methods (Birchmeier, 2020). Dion (2019) describes making the album with 'new people...new sound, new approach' (*Céline Dion*), its nightclub and concerto elements illustrate it was recorded and produced in Las Vegas and Montreal. Rolling Stone labels her 'a diva very capable of keeping up with the times' (Spanos, 2019), so creative and stylistic adaptability are publicly and culturally recognised.

Current artists like Maroon 5, Justin Bieber, and Clean Bandit also utilise similar musical elements. Their music also blends aspects of pop, rock, and R&B influences, and they include orchestral-style devices and arrangements to broaden the spectrum of their song-writing and audience appeal. Pop albums have to follow production criteria; clarity, balance, loudness, contrast, creative progression, and ensure the vocals are the main feature. *Courage* meets them all.

3.

This song epitomises common pop-production techniques. Moccio, composer and producer of *A New Day Has Come* (IMDB, 2020), returns as co-writer and producer on this pop ballad. His custom setup includes an AEA A440, AKG C414 and SM58 on his Yamaha Grand

piano, and a Neumann U87 capturing the singer (Citytv, 2016). This indicates that microphone choice and placement is a strategic starting technique (Nichols, 2018). The vocals appear mixed using bus send processing; blending 2 busses with opposing-sized reverbs to better control the immediate and longer reflections (Sample Magic, 2020). This is common vocal treatment that usually has more de-esser than on this track, but it suits the intimate timbre of the genre and the artist's vocals. The strings are likely to be virtual, or a rich real/virtual mix; the pan, spread and depth are a real/virtual mix according to sections, and are played perfectly with small tempo changes every 2 bars to emphasise movement.

The most effective and underrated technique is the song structure. The artist ignores conventions and improvises further with creative and technical ideas, like half/whole bar rubato, spot delay, and the additional 4th part/bridge 2.

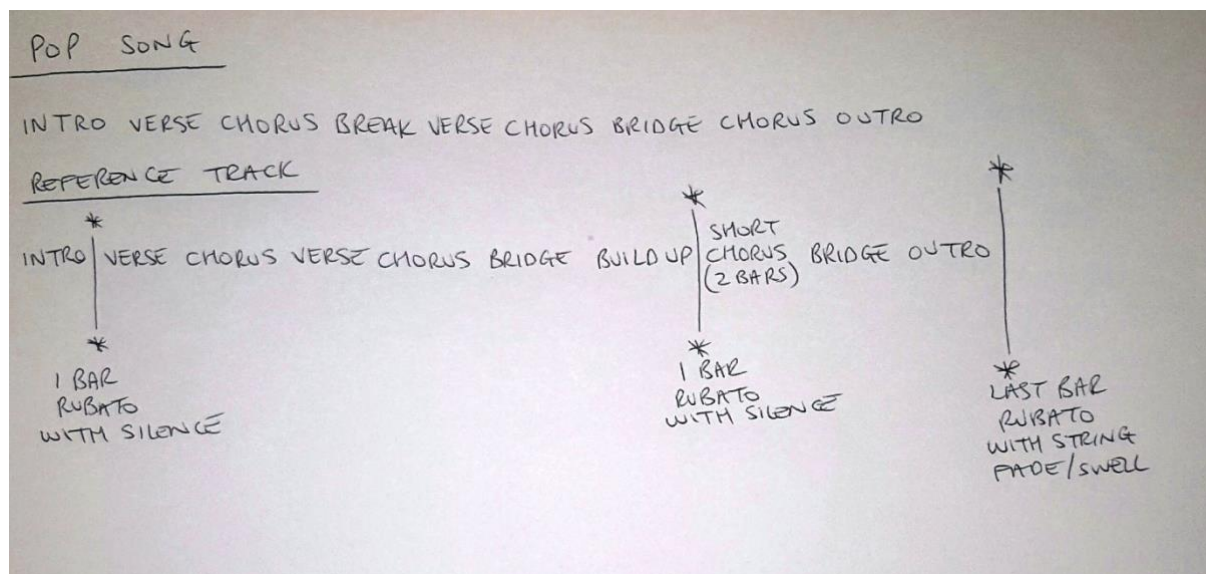


Fig. 1 Comparison of structure and devices.

I incorporated these techniques into my track; they embellished and supported the already versatile string arrangement, accentuated the depth and spread, and gave complexity to the body of my song.

4.

I used essential string section devices including bowing techniques, tonal weight and sonority, gradual rise, soft floats, climaxes, doubling and enforcing. They create the illusion of volume by filling the soundscape; it's vital these are programmed accurately or left out as imperfections are amplified (Sebesky, 1994). Weder emphasises the value of making string 'authentic' over 'realistic' and using real players wherever possible (Spitfire Audio, 2019). This is why I performed as much and edited as little as possible, then layered multiple takes to synthesise room spread and add movement (Hughes, 2017). Gardini (2019) recommends carefully plotting 'pyramids' when automating expression, limiting the rise and fall to long notes produces soft and slow sounds and adds authenticity, it was a lengthy but rewarding process. Berthume (2015) stresses that knowledge of instrument behaviour and correct articulation and can make any stock or cheap samples sound more authentic; I studied the source material and genre intently. Whilst ultimately no live instruments were used, meticulous layering and panning was used in the sub/mix, as well as doing multiple takes to capture varying emotional intensities of my performance.

5.

I experimented to create a feedback loop to capture a natural reverb. I set up a room mic into which I played the midi strings from the speakers, which then fed back into my DAW. I abandoned this idea because that's not how room micing works, however this is a concept I would be keen to explore given more time and resources. I acquired audience feedback at several production stages from a diverse sample group - both the technical and non-technical data helped enhance my piece. A comment about sounding epic inspired me to extend the build-up and write an orchestra percussion section part; a peculiar measure but one that complemented the ambience and structure.

Similar artists of the genre provided inspiration but I had the problem of choosing a voice. With no response to my 'singer wanted' ads I attempted the task myself but failed at capturing the essence of the power ballad. My voice has unpleasant frequency peaks at 130, 206, 390, 520, 780 and 1560 Hz (Cs and Gs); it was challenging and became futile to mix untrained vocals with this arrangement because they lacked the essence of the genre. I chose instead to write a guitar part and keep it an instrumental piece.

Track 2: My Oubliette

Reference Track: Boulevard of Broken Dreams – Green Day

Genre: Pop-punk

1.

Rock My World argues Pop-punk is 'contemporary music for those disaffected or alternative types during their youth, and yet it managed to bridge the gap between the marginalization and mainstream success with relative ease' (Micky, 2019). Firstly, it combines the edgier, harder musical elements of punk rock with the rounded musical devices typical of popular or chart music. Secondly, it softens the stylistic and cultural essence of punk and delivers it in a pop music package for the mainstream audience.

Pop music production techniques include 2-3-minute-long songs, using repetitive 3-part structure, simple chord progressions, catchy melodies, and repeated musical and vocal hooks. AllMusic.com (2020) describes pop-punk as 'power-pop melodies and chord changes with speedy punk tempos and loud guitars' and lists Green Day as the 2nd entry. Essentially, themes of detachment, misery and antiauthoritarianism appear both musically and lyrically in the performance and production.

2.

2004's *American Idiot* was a 'politically charged album with operatic scope' with all the above elements, so at its core is punk (Albert, 2020). Boulevard of Broken Dreams fuses aspects of both genres; It contains the correct arrangement and structure, and genre appropriate voices and reverbs. Lyrically it tells of despair and hopelessness which is reflected in the vocal tonality, the eerie tremolo of the electric guitar, and the key of F Minor that has 4 flats in which it's written. However, as iconic as this technique is, it breaks the conformity of punk and leans towards pop. This is further supported by the short echo reverb that sits behind the already softer vocals. Artists of the genre include Fall Out Boy, Weezer and Blink-182, all of whom adopt similar techniques across their albums.

3.

The key to capturing the punk sound was pushing the limits of the recording and production - the performance also had to be harder, faster and louder (Montgomery, 2006). From chord sequence to playing technique to bass and drums mix, this song was recorded as dynamically loud as was possible, noticeably in the overdrive, tremolo, amplitude dynamics, balance and outro dissonance.

2-stage auxiliary mixing is a typical technique, it uses soft EQ and hard compression to ‘control’ each sound (Webb, 2020). The texture and quality are down to the tone of the instruments, which supersedes digital effects plugins and stays true to punk recording methodologies. The acoustic guitar and each drum is sent through a compressor with a short attack and long release, then sent through a boost EQ with another harder compressor. This obtains a clean pop-style signal from a punk arrangement. Playing techniques affect the recording so choose your gear carefully, learn its capabilities and energise your performance to avoid unnecessary editing (Barnes, 2016). Create size utilising a mix bus, routing 4 guitar takes to an aux channel lets you compress and EQ them together allowing you to make it big but keep it tight (Sandström, 2017).

4.

Familiarising by listening and playing to similar songs helps understand the genre, and get an idea of the production’s styles and boundaries. This also helped me adopt and import other styles and devices into my song. Much of my production time was spent capturing musical ideas, and engineering guitar sound via pedal, amp and DAW settings. The guitars lent themselves to the multi-track recording techniques; Huber (2018) suggests combining distant micing and pickup techniques. My layout included stereo acoustic guitar pickups that delivered definition and depth, as well as distortion and the challenges of The Boundary Effect, ‘a hollow sound due to phase cancellations that occur between the direct sound and delayed sounds that are reflected off the floor and nearby surfaces’ (p.136). This caused delays and extensive mixing and was eventually abandoned; the cheap pickups produced a poor signal with a hazy tone that no amount of EQ could fix.

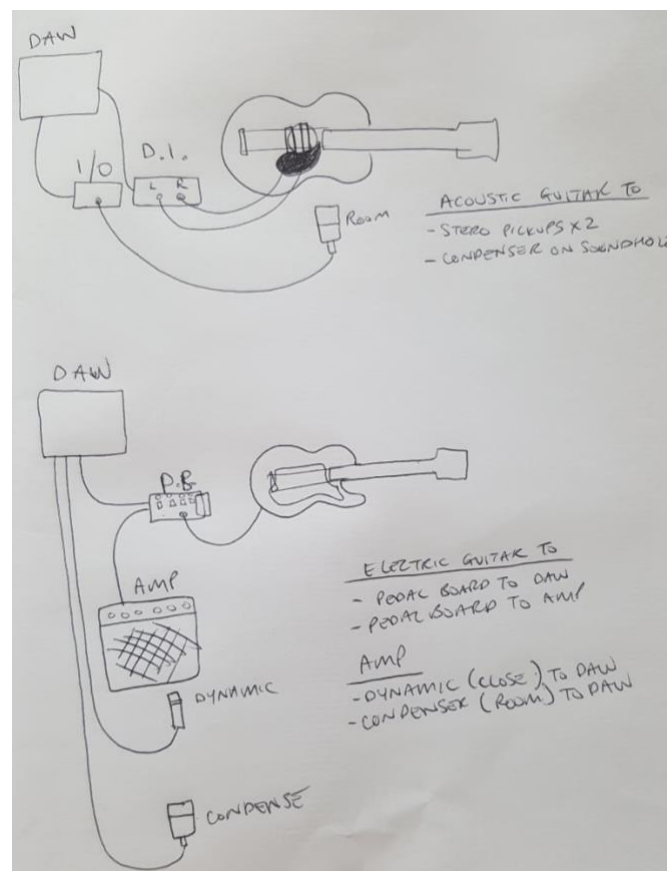


Fig. 2 The layout of the recording setup.

Issues linked to both methods result in a) cost effective but tinny D.I., or b) richer acoustics with bleeding (Bartlett and Bartlett, 2017) - both are reasons I'll use a properly insulated room in the future. Originally I decided against the tremolo because it was unique to that song's character, not the genre. After careful consideration, I opted to use it thinly instead to add depth. However, layering the guitars created further problems, when combined with the poor sound of the acoustic pickups all multi tracking had to be minimised. Furthermore, I had to use a blend of acoustic and clean electric guitars to obtain the original rhythm track.

Working with bands enabled me to quickly compose and structure this song, the drum part was written in-between guitar recordings. Since it's a 4/4 beat with irregular embellishments and limited changes it suits the genre perfectly. Reflecting continually, I made adjustments in real time avoiding the need to reamp the guitar track; I may attempt this in future. Recording was an organic matter; loops were used to capture the most complete takes to avoid comping but mainly to capture the energy and movement of my performance. A fine balance must be negotiated when mixing pop with alternative genres; the gritty nature of punk requires this.

5.

Lacking confidence I originally planned to programme the bass and mic the drums, after recording the guitars I became comfortable and inspired with the bass and chose to use midi drums instead. I didn't expect to use correction tools but the bass required miniscule quantisation, ultimately an effective performance was captured. An unexpected throat infection halted any further singing in these productions; with no success locating an alternative singer the song is without the vocal track.

I chose to use the same guitar and manipulate the signal via analogue and digital channels for consistency. In future I plan to try different models; the specifications and pickup arrangements contribute to the sound uniqueness.

Track 3: Fool Me Once

Reference Track1: Xanny – Billie Eilish

Reference Track 2: Sail – AWOLNATION

Genre: Alt-pop

1.

The characteristics that define alt-pop music are having “broad appeal but that is produced by performers who are outside the musical mainstream and that is typically regarded as more original, eclectic, or musically or intellectually challenging than most pop music” (Merriam-webster.com, 2020). Stylistically and creatively this is accurate, but their musical success places them into the mainstream. Occasionally the alt prefix is added when music isn't quite a formulaic match to pop. AllMusic (2020) has compiled alt-pop artists and at the top of list are Björk, The Cure, and R.E.M. These artists abide by those rules yet produce completely different music via very different production means - my recording and engineering background agrees with and supports this.

To complicate things, Nine Inch Nails is alternative by genre. Their film score and soundtrack contributions earned them mainstream recognition and popularity; however, they have been societally identified and recategorised from alt to industrial to dark to gothic following cultural responses to their works. They use all known production techniques in their music but remain alternative despite their success because they are not a pop act, meaning the alt factor can also refer to the end product sound or style.

2 and 3.

Musically Xanny ticks all the boxes. It's innovative, original and different in approach and execution. Billie Eilish and producer Phinneas O'Connell slowly develop an acoustic/minimalist/pop song in the key of A Major and Largo tempo combining late Beatles-style piano progressions, vocal layers with an essence of Lana Del Rey, jazz instrumentation, processing techniques such as sub mixing, bus compression, automated panoramic tremolo on lead vocal and widespread harmonised backing vocals. Although it's a heavy process this innovative combination makes her brand of pop sound unique.

Comparatively, Sail by AWOLNATION builds and releases tension by dynamically contrasting binaurally separated strings with layered synths and rock drums, and Marilyn Manson-style overdrive vocals. This effect can be obtained by 'going in hot' (recording with high desk gain) or hard-panning parallel distortion (recording revolution, 2015). These techniques aren't typical of pop but are an innovative production sequence, and when applied this way they provide pop songs with the musically distinctive alt element. These songs vary technically, creatively and stylistically, yet their unconventional and eclectic sound and use of production techniques places them both into the alt-pop category.

4.

Rather than processing vocals, these production techniques were applied in principally to create unique and innovative instrument patches stylised with original technical sequences. The verse and chorus basses were tailored by submixing different patches to create distinct voices with spectral depth. These instruments were manipulated further by automating compression and effects sends instead of adjusting channel strip settings. This technique provided the amplitude and balance control required of heavily processed instruments.

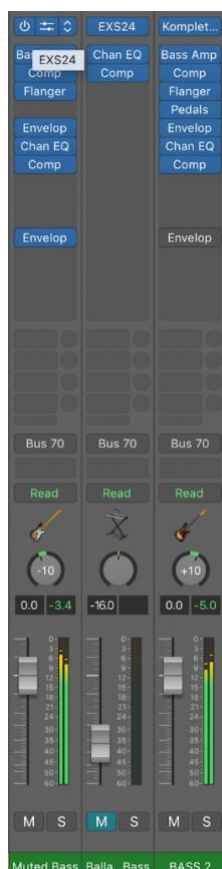


Fig. 3 Bass 2 submix component processing.



Fig. 4 East Bay drum kit pre-submix.

Similarly, the lead and creepy synths were created by EQ sweeping and submixing multiple different patches and automating send effects, delays and envelopes. As with the creepy synth, binaural mixing techniques were utilised on the percussion tracks, different patches were imported from various drum kits and layered to stress disparity, depth and diverse proximity.

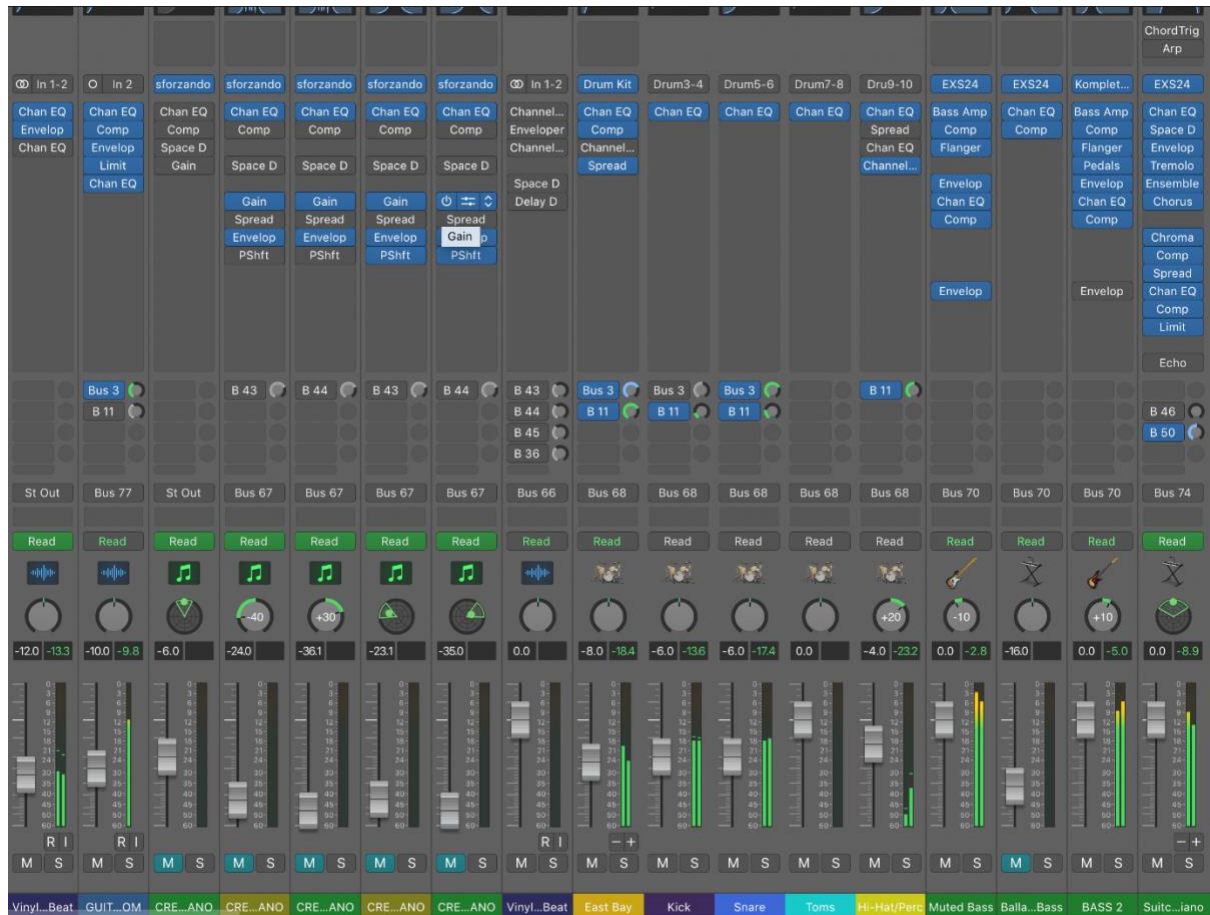


Fig. 5 Varying pre-submix pan, sends and levels.

Conflicting instruments like kick and bass were sub-mixed to control the output, then corrective sidechain compression helped tightened the final mix. Originally the vocals were processed with automated send effects then panoramically layered, but my voice is low/mid heavy so this tool was limited to instrumental spot effect to avoid muddying the mix and damaging the song's structural contrast. The mix still appeared muddy so I rerecorded using a Xanny-style whisper-singing technique to separate it from the bass. This method needed some de-essing and may have worked reasonably were it not for my damaged voice, for which this track is also instrumental.

However, referring to the production process attempted, using call-and-response I created loudness and texture within the song structure. The reference tracks rely on the principles of instrumentation, contrasting dynamics and iconic vocals. I implemented the vocal processing of the songs but sadly only mimicked the same unmistakable sound; to avoid emulating the original I used the same technique but varied the modulation type. It was still too suggestive of the original and sounds inauthentic; the best option was to focus on using suitable sounds.

Producing an original pop song without borrowing too many influences is challenging and shouldn't need a forensic musicology approach, but in this case I focused on mapping sections, building layers and controlling signals. I learned from working with producers that certain synth patches work better together and mismatching virtual instrument can often produce more clarity and contrast. This technique can be a quick-fix or a reference tool but I plan to use it more often.

Arrangement	Intro	Chorus	Verse	Chorus	Verse	Chorus	Bridge	Chorus	Outro
4	M S R Dry Standard Kit								
5	M S R Vinyl Fu...ak Beat								
6	M S R GUI...OM...B C								
7	M S R CREEPY PIANO								
8	M S R CREEPY PIANO								
9	M S R CREEPY PIANO								
10	M S R CREEPY PIANO								
11	M S R CREEPY PIANO								
12	M S R Vinyl Fu...ak Beat								
13	M S R East Bay								
14	M S R Muted Bass								
15	M S R Ballad E...ric Bass								
16	M S R BASS 2								
17	M S R Suitcas...ic Piano								
18	M S R BASS								
19	M S R BASS								
20	M S R BASS								
21	M S R BASS SIDECHAIN								
22	M S R Muted Bass								
23	M S R Basic Synth Det								
24	M S R Funky Lead								
25	M S R Fat Digital Comp								
26	M S R After Party								
27	M S R Atlanta								
28	M S R BASS 2								
29	M S R ROOM								
30	M S R ROOM...ECHAIN								
31	M S R Guitar 1								
32	M S R Brit and Clean								
33	M S R Guitar Sidechain								
34	M S R CREEP...Echo L								
35	M S R CREEP...Echo R								
36	M S R Yamaha...d Piano								
37	M S R Analog Circuits								
38	M S R BASS GUITAR								
39	M S R GUITAR...NTROL								
40	M S R Vinyl Funk Break								
41	M S R Piano Left Hand								
42	M S R Piano Right Hand								
43	M S R Crystal Pad.esi								
44	M S R Yamaha...d Piano								
45	M S R Brooklyn (Gavin)								
46	M S R Crystal Pad.esi								
47	M S R Crystal Pad.esi								
48	M S R East Bay (Max)								
49	M S R Untitled								
50	M S R Untitled.supreset								
51	M S R Untitled								
52	M S R Inst 5								
53	M S R Liverpool+								

Fig. 6 logic project overview.

Creatively I succeeded at writing an alt-pop song, but stylistically I failed at following the reference tracks. The guitar I added changed the overall feel and developed too much of an alt-rock element within the track. Likewise, the project culminated with too many elements and sounds, this is precisely the opposite of the reference track's feel and principles. The same can be said for the choice samples and patches, but that is a creative decision regarding preferred samplers and plugins which we do not share.

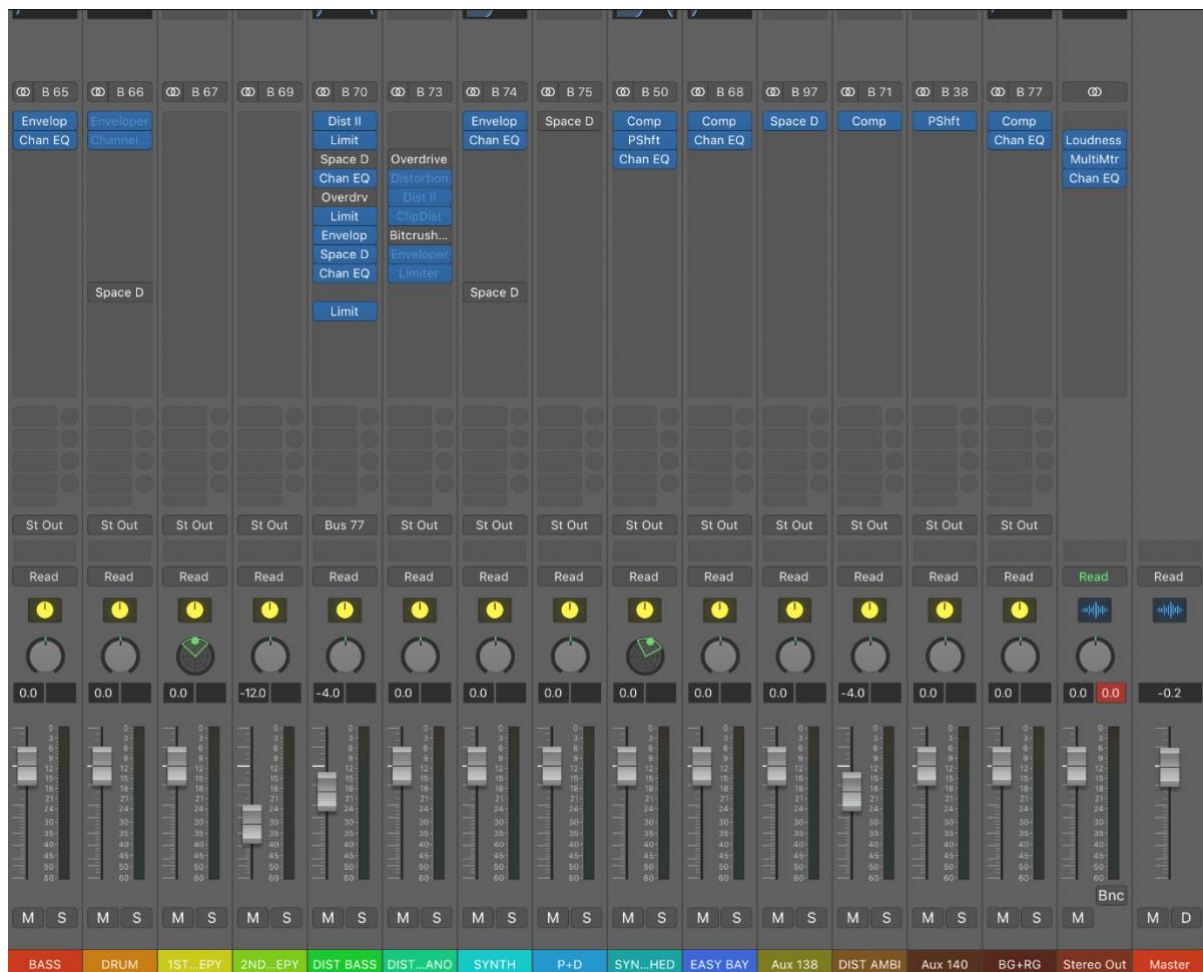


Fig. 7 project submix overview.

Conclusion

Music production utilises typical and genre-specific production techniques and methodologies; it often crosses many of them but the differences are technical application and end result. I continually reference Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails - his creative contributions include voice, composition, sound design and production in music, games and film. His techniques and technology choices are unlimited by convention or common practice; he creates in the best way he knows and is capable of innovating with the simplest of devices across genres.

I summarise this essay stating that knowing the source material and reflecting on a reference track is most of what's required for creating pop-based music today. Innovations would not occur if different effects and techniques were not tested, and neither would new styles. What music was not born from crossing and mixing cultural or technological aspects? Some things may have a proven track record; they are effective and reliable or have been used throughout history. However, there is always flexibility if the innovation generates a following or financial recompense. As demonstrated by the industry, pop is a label that encapsulates commercially marketable trend-based music made with whatever production tools and elements satisfies the investors, publishers and artists, typically in that order.

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